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MAXIME GORKY.

BY LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.

MAXIME GORKY is a noticeable personality, and a very great artist. In attempting any estimate of his genius and his influence, we have first to take into account that he comes from a far-away and an alien land. It would be difficult to find in the so-called civilized world another nation so temperamentally antipodal to the American as the Russian. It is even difficult to get exact information and make a true picture of the Russia of to-day, and perhaps it makes for our peace that our imagination has clipped wings and that no true realization reaches us. The Slav mind tends naturally to fanaticism; it is highly inflammable, and is often willing to suffer martyrdom for causes which we regard with silent approval or disapproval, and above all with patience, hoping that somehow, without any violence on our own part, right will ultimately prevail. Nihilism, which flourished between 1860 and 1870, was a demand for personal happiness and liberty, but it has practically died out and the revolutionary Socialist has held sway ever since. His demand is for the happiness of others and the future of his country. He aims at freeing the Russian people from autocracy and liberating the peasant, whose position now is radically worse than when he was a serf. His squalor and misery, his sufferings and outrageous poverty, his life broken by toil and deprivation, are sights to rouse heroes and make martyrs, and this they have done. The revolutionist is more than ready, he is eager, to die for the cause of the liberation of the people. The reforms of Alexander II proved useless, and the terms upon which a scrap of land was bestowed upon the serf were such as to cripple him with poverty and enslave him to lifelong toil. The sufferings of political prisoners, the horrible methods of torture used, are inconceivable

in our country. Whether it be the Slav temperament, or whether it be the awful power of suffering of a people having free access to European culture, and yet doomed to live in the worst evils of mediævalism, the Russian is penetrated with the most fundamental of sorrows, the sorrow over life as it is, over the essential contradiction between the real and the ideal; he eats out his soul at the inevitable hitch in the running of things; he steeps himself in chaotic dreams, and his sorrow is punctuated by anger against man, the social order and the Creator.

At the head of Russian literature of to-day and at the head of the revolutionary socialistic movement, stands Maxime Gorky, a man of amazing force and ability and of a twofold history, a personal life stranger than any he has yet depicted in his books and a literary career almost without parallel. For, whereas it took some decades for Tolstoy and Tourgeneff to win recognition, Gorky leaped into fame in less than a half-dozen years. He was a self-educated man; his first teacher was a cook on a river steamer, who gave him the "Lives of the Saints" to read, and later the works of Gogol, Ekkarthausen, Ouspensky and Dumas *père*.

"Write," Maxime Gorky instructed in a private letter, "write without fail that it was Korolenko who taught Gorky to write, and if Gorky learned little from Korolenko that was Gorky's fault. Write that the first teacher of Gorky was the cook Smourny, the second was the lawyer Lapin, the third, Kalioujny, a man outside the pale of society, and the fourth, Korolenko. I do not wish to write more of this. The memory of these great men touches me too nearly."

Gorky's childhood was hard and unnatural. His mother deserted him, his father died when the child was but four years old, of a disease caught while nursing him, and the maternal grandfather who brought him up, having reverses of fortune, sent the boy out to earn his own living in a shoe-shop when he was nine years old. It is not, however, fair to say that he is of peasant origin. His paternal grandfather was a colonel in the army of Nicholas I, and was dismissed on account of wanton cruelty to his soldiers at a time when very extraordinary cruelty would be necessary to attract notice. After Gorky left his grandfather's house, he never knew a home again until he had attained wealth and distinction. He was, at different

times, apprenticed to an ikon painter, worked in an underground bakeshop, sold *kwas* in the streets, and was assistant to a cook on a river boat and followed various callings of a like character.

“During all this time,” he says, “I gave myself up with zeal to the reading of all the classical books I could lay hands on. After the age of fifteen, I conceived a wild desire to study, to know. I went to Kazan, supposing the sciences were gratuitously imparted to those who desired knowledge. Finding this was not so, I entered a bakery at three rubles a month.” At nineteen, in despair, he attempted suicide and, being saved, once more took up the burden of life and sold apples in the streets. It was a sad career for a human being in the nineteenth century, but it was an eminently good preparation for the writer Gorky, for he saw all sorts and conditions of men, and he knew, not afar off, but by actual contact, their sufferings, their needs, their oppressions.

There are two picturesque scenes in young Gorky’s life, just as he was about to reach manhood: one is that of his taking his first tale, “*Makár Chudra*,” to a provincial paper. The editor kept him standing while he read it through, then he looked up and said, “Yes, we’ll take this,” and then, turning it over, he added, “but you haven’t signed it.” “No,” said the young Pieshkov. “Sign it,” said the editor. “Sign it ‘Gorky’” (which means bitter), said the youth. “‘Gorky’ and what else?” asked the editor. “Just ‘Maxime Gorky.’”

Another picture is that given by a railroad official near Zaryzin, where at one time Gorky worked. The account was published in “*l’Instruction*”:

“He [Gorky] was very exact in all his work. Recognizing him as a man of solid ability, we proposed to promote him to the weighing-machines, with a salary of twenty-five rubles a month. But he spent his money very strangely; as we all said, very foolishly, distributing it amongst the employees who had families, and the poor, giving a ruble here, or twenty-five kopecks there. He spent a great deal, too, on stamps, keeping up a vast correspondence; receiving letters every day, no one knew from where or from whom, and we were much interested and puzzled.

“During the leisure hours he could be seen surrounded by a crowd of workmen, talking on some instructive subject or reading a pamphlet aloud—moral, geographical, historical, astronomical; initiating his au-

ditors into the reality of the world and its phenomena. He pleased them much, for they were constantly seeking him out, and his speech was in fact always alert and picturesque. Meanwhile, it happened that we, his chiefs, became acquainted with Pieshkov. Reading a novel or some other work—I do not remember what—I chanced upon a passage about the freemasons; not understanding it, I asked the station-master for an explanation, as I took him to be the most likely man in the lot. He could not satisfy me. He said he had read things about the masons, but didn't really understand their doctrine. Just at this time, the overseer of the scales, young Pieahkov came up and, addressing himself to the station-master, said: 'Will you permit me to explain?' 'Do you know anything about freemasons?' 'I've read about them and I remember what I've read.' Then he fairly gave a lecture on freemasons, with such circumstantial details that I asked myself where on earth he could have gathered them. As I have said, he was a fascinating talker, and we were so interested that we should have been in danger of forgetting the trains, the station-master and I, had there been any then, but there were not. Two hours passed us; when Pieshkov left the station-master said to me 'Do you know, I believe young Pieshkov is an expelled student; he is far too intelligent for a baker or a scullion, and how he has read! I trust we'll have no misfortune on account of him! For the rest, luck go with him!'

"After this the station-master used to invite him to his home as a friend. Pieshkov would pass the time with us without the slightest embarrassment, smoking his cigarette and surprising us more and more with his knowledge and with his wide reading, so that we decided positively that he was a student expelled from the university.

"His work on the railroad lasted only a few months. One day he appeared at the office and asked for his wages, announcing that he was to leave. I paid him what was due and offered him a third-class ticket anywhere on the road that he might wish to go. He refused the ticket, saying he preferred to travel afoot. Pulling his hat down over his eyes and throwing his baggage on his back, he started off along the line, after friendly farewells to all the employees and workmen, who hurried around this man who had amused and instructed them for months.

"Some time ago, the works of Maxime Gorky fell into my hands, and as I read them something familiar but long forgotten seemed to hover about me. Finally, I saw a portrait of the author, and then I recognized my old comrade in the service."

From the beginning of the publication of his stories, Gorky realized that he had found his work, and from the start he had recognition. Before that, he had had but a vague and floating idea of aiding in some social and political revolution, vowing inwardly to become in himself "a great, active, social force." As soon as he began to write he understood how he could best

influence people and what he had to do in the world. He has published some eight or ten volumes of short stories, helped edit a paper, published three novels and three very remarkable plays, as well as magazine articles and short pieces of various kinds. There is nothing of the dilettante in Gorky's method of work. When he is writing he can work fifteen or sixteen hours at a stretch daily, only stopping to take such refreshment as is brought and put beside him. In his indomitable and irrepressible will power there is something that reminds one of Kipling; Gorky, too, has entered that warfare without discharge in which dreams are transformed into words, in which the creative will draws without end and without lassitude visible images in the concrete world. Gorky was a man born into the world an outcast and a superfluity, huddled out of all doors as mere scum and drift of humanity, and yet by his unaided efforts he has raised himself to the most prominent place in Russian literature, a literature that stands high among the literatures of the world. If in his aggressive will power he reminds one of Kipling, it is only in that, for the doctrines of the two men are diametrically opposed; as Kipling believes in egoism and imperialism, so Gorky believes in altruism and liberty. His personality is impressive as that of a great thinker, but it is also impressive as that of a man who is bearing the "wrongs world's weight" and who has put by all personal fear and desire. Tall and slender and awkward, with the square Slav head and face, heavy brown hair thrown back from a full, broad, much-lined forehead, a square jaw and projecting chin, deep-set, tragic, gray eyes, an ugly nose and a delicate, thin-lipped mouth, no mere enumeration of feature can do much to describe one of the saddest and the noblest of faces, a face that without smiling yet radiates benevolence and gentleness whenever he speaks. Impatient of all insincerities and hypocrisies, without guile or concealment, with something of the aggressiveness of youth in the face of pretension or cowardice or conformity, he is not a man to win popularity here, although in Russia he is the idol of the people; the idol, because he has laid bare the multiple vision of their wrongs and their sufferings. When he was imprisoned in 1905, a protest, signed by the most distinguished names in Europe, was sent in to the Russian Government demanding his release, lest Russia, nay, all Europe, lose one of its finest geniuses.

So much for his life; the last incident of it is too well known to need comment. Gorky himself is one of those who rebound from discouragement. There is something softening in universal acclaim and sympathy. The journalistic persecution of one of the world's greatest geniuses cut off Gorky's appeal to the people here for Russia, but it turned him back upon himself and set him writing the greatest novel he has yet attempted, a novel dealing with the aristocracy, the *bourgeoisie*, the peasant and the outbreak of the revolution. It is called "The Mother," and, if one may fairly make predictions for a novel but half written, it will indeed be one of the great epoch-making works.

No one who has read Gorky doubts that he is a very great artist. As a man of letters, though he is but thirty-seven years old, his place is as much assured as that of Tolstoy or Tourgeneff. From the first little story, "*Makár Chudra*," the finished artist is present. While there is in this tale a more romantic setting than Gorky ever allowed himself again, the chief features of his genius are already strongly marked; his admiration for strength, for sheer physical prowess and skill; his rating of freedom as higher than life or love; his keen vision, sensibility to music, but above all his feeling for man and nature as integral parts of one whole—for only so can one express that feeling for nature which seems, like a quality in the air, to have penetrated all lands and peoples in the last century, a feeling very different from the so-called love of nature of other centuries, of the posed and affected convention about nature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nature is the great setting for little human incidents, the whole in which men scurry hither and yon, bent on their little activities, but it is also the great way of flight, the other and the deeper self into which man escapes from his petty finitude, his limitations; it is the largeness and the peace from which he divorces himself at his peril. Throughout these stories there is the haunting sound of the sea, the wind of the steppes blowing. Gorky's vagabond, wandering over the earth, living from hand to mouth, is a vital fact and an outcome of Russian semi-civilization; but there is, moreover, an under-current of half-symbolic interpretation; it is the human soul beating its wings against the bars of its narrow cage, yearning out into something nearer the infinite, restless at its flesh confinement and its narrow limitations. There is a little tale

about a finch which shows the symbolism more clearly than elsewhere:

"During an awful stillness in the forest, there sounded a wonderful song; the daring singer complained of the darkness and narrow-mindedness of the fettered life in the woods and declared war on the gods. All the birds flew together to the spot from which the marvellous song came, and to their surprise they found only a little vagabond finch. He summoned the birds to follow him, to leave the dark woods and damp marshes, and to turn away from all cowardice and questioning; but the practical professor of modern history—the woodpecker—said it would be useless to fly away, for, he said, beyond the forest is only a field, empty in summer and covered with snow in winter, and at the other end of the field lives Grisha, the bird-catcher. The poor finch didn't know what to say and in his defence he could only murmur: 'Yes, I lied. I didn't truly know what lay beyond the coppice, but it makes one so happy to believe and to hope. Perhaps the woodpecker is right, but what is the use of his truth; it weighs like a stone on the wings and keeps one from flying high, high, out into the heavens.'"

From the very beginning, Gorky's hero, in the guise of a gypsy, a vagabond, a thief, a wanderer, a dweller in basements and cellars, is yet the human spirit going forth on its own adventure into the world of nature and of ideals, ever further, never complacent, never satisfied, never wholly at ease in the flesh that confines it, ever seeking its liberty.

"*Makár Chudra*," that first story which the young boy took to the provincial newspaper, opens with the outer world, the great, free, limitless setting against which the little human life huddles, hardly daring to look out:

"In from the sea blew a wet, cold wind, bearing the melancholy music of the tide pounding the shore, and the rustling of the low beach bushes, out over the steppes. From time to time the dust blew wrinkled, frozen, yellowish leaves right into our fire. The overhanging mists of the autumn night trembled and from time to time shrank up on the one side or the other, and then for an instant, out to the left, one could see the illimitable prairie, or, to the right, the limitless sea, and straight in front just opposite me I watched the powerful form of *Makár Chudra*."

There from the first is the hand of the literary artist; the complete framework of the gypsy's romantic tale of the young wanderer who, rather than submit to the servitude of passion, killed his beloved because he loved her, and then thanked her father for killing him, because death is better than slavery. The final lines bring back again the scene in which the story is laid:

"The rain fell faster, and the sea's song was a sad and solemn hymn in honor of that brave, proud gypsy pair—Loika and Radda, the daughter of the old soldier. And the two of them seemed to be soaring still and dumb through the night's darkness, and however swift the spirit of the beautiful singer sped, yet he never quite touched his beloved."

This was the first story. As the work progressed the tendency has been ever more and more away from any conventionally constructed story, more and more toward some bit of life realistically conceived, minutely described, the whole attention riveted upon the exact truth, life as it actually is. Alas, Gorky's eyes have been fixed upon the pain, upon the anguish, upon the brutal cruelties of life; and he himself says that the flaw in his work is that it cannot give joy, which is the greatest function of art. But at least his work does perform the function of tragedy, it purges the emotions by portraying scenes of terror and pity. The minute analysis of pain, of dull grieving, as in "*L'Angoisse*," of the brutal amusements of bored and isolated people, as in "*Par Ennuie*," of the sudden outbursts of human tenderness and pity, as in "*Once in Autumn*," these stand out penetrating, precise, eloquent. Gorky can put himself into the most secret and intricate workings of the human mind, and show how the thought turns in upon itself, haunted by the dull futility or sordid meanness of the daily routine. Thought, held in a net and forced to move circwise, ever asking the question: "Why? why? Why am I here?" receiving no answer and yet seeing no escape from the awful, insistent question that may invade any soul at any instant: "What is it for?" In the first story the old gypsy warns the youth against this awful introspection which paralyzes activity:

"Look, as the day chases the night and both flee round and round the earth, so must you flee all thought about life, and then you'll not cease to love it, but once one begins to question, to ferret into its meanings, you get very tired of life. It's always so. It was that way with me. Yes, yes, young falcon, even so with me."

Another theme of the earlier stories is the brave and beautiful *camaraderie* among the unfortunates, as in "*The Ex-Men*," the loyal tenderness between the captain and the teacher, or in "*The Chums*," the devotion even unto death of the two congenial pilferers. It is as if Gorky were saying: "Everywhere, at least, there

is the soul; we cannot fall so low but that there is the gleam of beauty and of selfishness which makes the creature human."

Any one who turns back to the books of Tourgeneff and remembers his dreamy, intellectual, will-paralyzed heroes, must note the marked difference in the modern type. Either the typical Slav is a very Hamlet by innate tendency, or the strangely slow emerging from barbarism of the nation has created Hamlets. They are a people restrained on all sides in their activities and yet free to think and gifted with abundant mentality. In revolt against this tendency, all Gorky's later works are calls to action. He defines the socialistic doctrines in the "Family Bezseménoff," his earliest play; and the adopted son, Nil, is the man of action, the man no longer content with analysis, emotions, dreams, but determined to mould life according to his will, to act and to get results. He says:

"I know that life is painful, that at moments it is villainously cruel, that a frenetic power, gross and ruthless, crushes man, I know it and I don't like it and I'm going to rebel. I want no such order. *I don't want it!* Life is a serious thing but not yet organized. . . . Life exacts for such organization all my powers and all my capacities. I'm not a giant, but I'm an honest and a healthy man, and so I say to myself: Never mind! We'll conquer yet! And with every capacity of my soul I'm going to penetrate to the depths of life; I'm going to pick it up and knead it this way and that, prevent some things and help on others. . . . And see! that and that only is the joy of living."

So Gorky utters the call to the will to come out and strive for the joy of creating, of kneading life this way and that, preventing evil things and helping on good ones. For, whatever other forms of life there may be, human life is struggle, and joy is in choosing the better side, and in keeping actively in the thick of the fight.

There is no space here to make an analysis of Gorky's novels, those wonderful pictures of *bourgeois* life. The famous play, however, "The Night Lodgings," must be considered as being one of the most powerful outgrowths of Gorky's genius. This play ran two hundred nights in Berlin and two seasons in Moscow, where it was performed at the famous Artists' Theatre, and where Madame Pieshkov, Gorky's wife, together with some other amateurs, took part in a real play for the first time. It is not easy to get an impression of the enthusiasm the play excited, even from the criticisms that occurred at the time. It is difficult to

put into words the tremendous impression of force, of massive, deep-seeing genius, that one gets from the mere reading of the play. The Moscow correspondent of the St. Petersburg "Novosti" wrote:

"Here in Moscow there has been an event which demands relation. It is the overwhelming, the extraordinary, the unheard-of success of Maxime Gorky's 'Night Lodgings.' I call it an event, because this new success of the famous Maxime is a veritable revolution. . . . He has shown himself a powerful sovereign of human thought."

In the same review the writer, M. Rackchanine, says:

"If such an appeal for the sanctity of the human being as such were to sound from the pulpit of a cathedral or from the chair of a university, it would produce a very poignant emotion; but the impression is an hundred times stronger when the words sound in the putrid atmosphere of low night lodgings, and it is in this appeal—mark you—that the whole significance of the play lies."

As in life and in doctrine Gorky accepts no disguises, no concealments, no conventions, so in this play, too, he has laid aside every conventional formula, every structural tradition. There is apparently no beginning, no middle or climax of complication, no end. There is a succession of scenes, scenes of absolute and convincing reality. A close student only will notice the subtlety with which each speaker's first words are chosen. They fall so naturally into the play that only after many readings does one realize how entirely they introduce the character, are an essential part of the individuality, and are such as that character only could have spoken.

The night lodgings are in a cellar. The ceiling is vaulted and of stone, plastered over in patches and badly smoked. A small square window is letting in, at the opening of the play, the first gray light of daybreak. There are beds all round the room, a door leading into the kitchen where three or four of the lodgers dwell, and an antechamber belonging to the thief. In this space there are fifteen to twenty habitual night lodgers. Those who are the principal speakers in the play are the keeper of the lodgings, a pious miser of fifty-four, superstitious, suspicious and hard, but well able to collect his debts; there is his fierce and shrewish young wife, Vasilissa, of twenty-six, who is in love with the thief, Pepel, the richest, the cleverest, the most highly considered of all the lodgers. Pepel, by the irony of fate's purposes, is in love with Vasilissa's sister, Natasha, the heroine, if any

one can be considered to play a greater part than another in this strangely human play where one destiny is just as important as the next. Consenting finally to become the *fiancée* of Pepel, she is practically scalded to death by her jealous sister, and in the end we are left in doubt whether she is dead, in a hospital, or has simply disappeared from sight. Kleshtch is a locksmith, who inhabits one corner of the room and files keys diligently, while his wife Anna is dying of consumption in the bed with the curtains. Kleshtch is a dull, hard-working, unintelligent and brutal churl, promising himself release from sordid deprivation once he is rid of his wife. Though he bears her dying with non-chalance, yet the sight of death so overwhelms him that he is moved to sell his tools and to bury her, and is then left without money, without tools, and without escape from his corner. Anna dies in the beginning of the second scene, which is concerned mainly with the reflections upon death of the lodgers and their heartless haste to get rid of the body. Luke is the passing stranger whose faith is in the imagination or in the thought *about* life. He says, a man will be what you call him, and so his greeting when he enters is, "Good health to you, honest friends." He soothes Anna's dying moments with promises of heaven; he tells the actor, whose great boast, and excuse likewise, is that his entire organism is poisoned through and through with alcohol, of the great free sanatorium where he can be cured, and where his powers and his memory can be given back to him; he promises Natasha that if she will but believe in the honor and the purity of the thief, he will be pure and honest, and he promises Pepel a new life of peace and virtuous gain and true domesticity with Natasha. To one and the other he goes saying that the one reality is one's belief about things. He tells Satine, the cynic, that God exists if only we have faith in Him. Satine, however, was introduced saying: "Words, words, I've had enough of them, brother, enough of all the human words. Words bore me. I've heard each one of them at least a thousand times." And again he says: "Give me five kopecks and I'll believe anything, that you're a genius, a hero, a crocodile, a commissary of the police, Kleshtch —just give me the five kopecks."

In these two characters one sees the two extremes of idealism and realism. It is interesting to look over the reviews and see how few of the critics have at all made out what Luke is supposed,

with his kindly words, his dreamy faiths, his gentle veilings of reality, to accomplish. Many writers upon the play have taken him to represent the solution of the awful human tragedy. But he is really intended to expedite the catastrophe. Once thoroughly understanding Gorky's strange stand against idealism, one will not be so apt to mistake this most subtle bit of work. In the beginning, when Luke is reproached for annoying the other occupants by singing and singing ill, he replies: "Well, so it is. A man goes about by himself thinking how well I'm doing, and all the time the others are thinking 'what a nuisance he is'!"

It is for this desire to turn the current of life from the present to the future, from the immediate need to an unreal spiritual exaltation, that Gorky blames Tolstoy. Gorky's theory of life is to face the bare facts square in the face, and then to "knead life this way and that," not for one's own gain, but for the good of humanity. There are many scenes in this wonderful play of poignant pathos, but it is impossible to treat them at length. That, for example, in which Nastia, the young woman who, in all these miseries, feeds herself day and night on cheap romances, tries to tell the others the tale of "*L'Amour Fatal*" as her own experience, and is hooted at by the audience because the hero of the love adventure is Raoul in the first part of the story and Gaston in the other. To her Luke says: "Never mind, come away, it's all nothing; don't be grieved. I know, and I believe you. It's you who have the truth of this, not they! If you believe you once had a veritable love, well, then, it existed; yes, it existed."

Over and over, with biting satire, Gorky points out the failure of the idea by itself; only when it is acted upon, only when belief is carried out into a concrete form, is it worth while.

The step from Tourgeneff, the last great Russian to hold our attention, to Gorky is very great. Tourgeneff was a supreme craftsman, but he had folded his hands as far as life went. His sole business was in depicting it, and this he did, exquisitely but sadly, as does a man who has renounced hope; but Gorky's work, with its horrors and its anguish, is a trumpet call to action. Life, he feels, is not a thing to despair of, not a thing to sit still and frame theories about, life is the thing which we pick up in our hands and "knead this way and that."

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